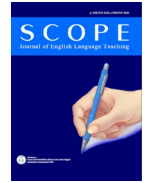




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Research Article

Implementing Project-Based Learning: Effects on EFL Students' Language Acquisition and Engagement

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KEYWORDS

Project-Based Learning;
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explores the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) stages by an English teacher to enhance language acquisition among young learners in an Indonesian elementary school. The research examines the specific PBL stages employed and investigates students' perceptions of these stages in relation to their English language development. Classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis were used to collect data from the participating teacher and students. The findings reveal that the teacher implemented a four-stage PBL approach: Starting the Project, Developing the Project, Reporting to the Class, and Assessing the Project. Each stage incorporated key PBL principles such as student autonomy, authentic tasks, scaffolding, and ongoing assessment. Students expressed positive perceptions of the PBL stages, highlighting benefits such as clear project introduction, engaging research activities, valuable teacher feedback, and peer collaboration. They also reported increased motivation to use English due to the teacher's encouragement, personal interest, and the project's engaging nature. Although, some viewed English use as merely a project requirement. The study concludes that the PBL stages implemented by the teacher positively enhanced students' English language learning. The findings contribute to the understanding of PBL implementation in EFL contexts, providing insights into young learners' experiences with this approach and highlighting the potential of PBL to enhance language skills and engagement. Simultaneously, the study identifies areas for improvement in PBL implementation, offering valuable guidance for educators seeking to optimize this approach in their classrooms.

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INTRODUCTION

The landscape of English language education in Indonesia has undergone significant changes in recent years, particularly with the reintroduction of English into the

elementary school curriculum in 2021 through the Merdeka Curriculum, also known as the Emancipated Learning Curriculum. This shift has brought both opportunities and challenges for educators, especially those tasked with teaching English to young learners

without formal training in English language instruction (Maharsi, 2011).

In response to these changes and the need for effective teaching methodologies, many schools have begun experimenting with Project-Based Learning (PBL). PBL is an instructional approach that places projects at the heart of the curriculum, shaping teaching and learning activities (Thomas, 2000). It emphasizes student-centered, collaborative activities that culminate in an end product, contextualizing learning, and fostering investigation, cooperation, and creativity.

The potential of PBL in language education has been recognized by numerous researchers. Almulla (2020) and Yaprak (2022) have demonstrated its effectiveness in second language learning contexts, noting that it provides immersive experiences for practicing language skills and creates natural situations for using the target language. Furthermore, PBL has been shown to enhance students' creative and critical thinking skills, improve presentation abilities, and boost problem-solving capabilities (Astuti et al., 2024; Tama et al., 2016; Kalabzová, 2015).

However, the implementation of PBL in EFL contexts, particularly at the elementary level in Indonesia, remains understudied. While previous research has examined aspects of PBL implementation (Kartikawati, 2020; Nasrullah, 2013; Dewi, 2016), there is a gap in understanding how PBL stages are implemented to enhance English language acquisition among young learners and how students perceive these approaches.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating the implementation of PBL in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom at an Indonesian elementary school. Specifically, it seeks to answer two primary research questions:

1. What stages of PBL do teachers implement to enhance English language acquisition among young learners in the classroom?
2. How do the students perceive the stages of PBL implemented by teachers to enhance their English language acquisition in the classroom?

By exploring these questions, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on PBL in EFL contexts, offering insights into effective implementation strategies and student perceptions. These findings have implications for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers involved in English language education at the elementary level in Indonesia and potentially in similar EFL contexts globally.

Project-Based Learning: Definition and Characteristics

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is an educational methodology grounded in constructivist principles, emphasizing learning within a defined context, active student involvement, and knowledge construction through social interaction. The Buck Institute for Education (2023) defines PBL as a teaching method where teachers facilitate learning through the exploration of challenging, real-world problems.

Key characteristics of PBL include:

1. **Centrality:** Projects form the primary vehicle for learning, not just supplementary activities (Thomas, 2000).
2. **Driving Questions:** Open-ended, thought-provoking questions guide students' exploration (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006).
3. **Constructive Investigations:** Students actively build knowledge through inquiry and problem-solving (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006).
4. **Autonomy:** Students have significant control over project direction (Thomas, 2000).
5. **Realism:** Projects are grounded in authentic situations to enhance relevance and engagement (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006).

PBL in Language Learning Contexts

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, Project-Based Learning (PBL) has shown promise in enhancing language acquisition by providing students with opportunities to use language in authentic contexts. Farouk (2016) demonstrated that PBL can help students develop confidence, independence, and collaborative teamwork skills.

The effectiveness of PBL in language learning is supported by several theoretical frameworks. Swain's (2005) output hypothesis emphasizes the importance of language production opportunities in second language acquisition, which PBL naturally facilitates. Furthermore, the collaborative nature of PBL aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in cognitive development (Cameron, 2003).

Challenges in Implementing PBL in EFL Contexts

Despite its potential benefits, implementing PBL in EFL contexts presents several challenges. These include:

1. Limited exposure to English outside the classroom (Musthafa, 2001, 2003).
2. Students' limited vocabularies and linguistic competence (Cameron, 2003).
3. Lack of quality teaching materials and resources (Musthafa, 2003).
4. Time constraints and curriculum demands (Musthafa, 2001).

5. Diverse learning styles and paces (National Research Council, 2000).
6. Maintaining student engagement and motivation (Paul, 2003).
7. Balancing L1 and L2 use in the classroom (Cameron, 2003).

PBL Implementation Models

Several models have been proposed for PBL implementation. This study used two models.

1. Simpson's (2011) four-stage model:
 - a. Starting the project
 - b. Developing the project
 - c. Reporting to the class
 - d. Assessing the project
2. Alotaibi's (2020) six-stage model:
 - a. Motivation
 - b. Modeling
 - c. Implementation
 - d. Assessment
 - e. Public Product

These models provide a framework for understanding and analyzing PBL implementation in EFL contexts.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research method, incorporating a case study approach. This design was chosen to capture the nuances and complexities of classroom interactions and to provide a holistic perspective on the implementation of PBL in an EFL context (Creswell, 2014). The case study approach allowed for a focused exploration of PBL implementation in a specific setting—an Islamic elementary school where English language instruction plays a pivotal role in English lessons.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in a fifth-grade classroom at an elementary school where English is the exclusive medium of instruction for English classes. The class consisted of 22 students (11 male and 11 female) from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. These students had been immersed in an English-only language environment in English classes since their first year at the school.

The participating teacher had ample experiences of teaching English to young learners with over three years of teaching experience and strong English language proficiency, as evidenced by high TOEFL scores.

Data Collection Methods

Three primary methods were used for data collection:

1. Classroom Observations: Two English lessons were observed and recorded over the course of one project cycle. These observations focused on documenting teacher-student interactions, instructional strategies, and the overall classroom atmosphere.
2. Teacher Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participating teacher to gain insights into their pedagogical beliefs and practices related to PBL implementation.
3. Student Interviews: Nine students voluntarily participated in semi-structured interviews about their perceptions of the teacher's PBL strategies and their overall experience with the approach.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process followed a structured, multi-stage approach based on the methods outlined by Neuman (2006) and O'Connor and Gibson (2003):

1. Data Classification: Observation and interview data were sorted into relevant categories.
2. Data Transcription: Video recordings and interviews were transcribed verbatim.
3. Data Codification: Transcripts were coded to identify recurring patterns and themes.
4. Theme Identification: Coded data were analyzed to uncover significant trends and themes.
5. Theme Interpretation: Identified themes were interpreted in relation to the research questions and existing literature.

This systematic approach ensured a thorough examination of the data, enabling the identification and interpretation of significant patterns in PBL implementation and student perceptions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings reveal several key aspects of the PBL approach and its impact on language acquisition.

Effective Implementation of PBL Stages

Observation data, align with the lesson plans, show that the participating teacher successfully implemented four key PBL stages: Starting the Project, Developing the Project, Reporting to the Class, and Assessing the Project. This structured approach provided a clear framework for students to engage with the language learning process. As evidenced in Lesson Plan 1, "The teacher begins by introducing the PBL project related to 'keberagaman' (diversity), a topic that students have previously learned about." This approach of building on prior knowledge aligns with best practices in language instruction and PBL methodology.

Clear Instruction Strategies

The teacher employed clear explanations, visual aids, and scaffolding techniques to support student understanding. This clarity was appreciated by students, as exemplified by S1's statement in the interview:

S1: Baik dan jelas. Tidak ragu-ragu dan lancar menjelaskannya.

(Good and clear. Not hesitant and fluent in explaining.)

The use of multiple instructional strategies catered to diverse learning styles and enhanced overall comprehension.

Student Autonomy and Engagement

A key finding was the positive impact of student autonomy on engagement levels. Students appreciated the freedom to choose topics and found research activities engaging, as illustrated by one of the students' comment

S6: Seru. Karena biasanya kalau di kelas itu kaya bosan jadi kalau keluar kelas kan jadi gak bosan seru.

(It's exciting. Because usually in class it's like boring, so when we go out of class it's not boring, it's exciting.)

This suggests that PBL can increase student motivation by allowing for personalized learning experiences.

Collaborative Learning and Peer Support

The project fostered collaborative learning and peer support among students. This was evident in students' efforts to encourage English use among their peers. For instance, S2 mentioned,

S2: Menggunakan bahasa Inggris. Minta aja menggunakan bahasa Inggris gitu caranya.

(Using English. Just ask to use English, that's the way.)

This peer-to-peer encouragement may contribute to a more supportive language learning environment.

Increase Motivation for English Use

Students reported increased motivation to use English during the project. This was sometimes driven by intrinsic factors, as illustrated by S9's statement

S9: Karena bahasa Inggris keren.
(Because English is cool.)

This increased motivation could lead to more frequent language practice and potentially faster acquisition.

Teacher's Adaptability and Support

The teacher demonstrated adaptability by providing individualized support and modifying instruction to meet diverse student needs. As the teacher reported,

T Actually, yes.

: Immediately.

So when they are struggling writing sentences, I address them immediately, 1 by 1.

This individualized attention is crucial in addressing the varied pace of language acquisition among students.

Challenge in Language Production

Despite the overall positive outcomes, some students struggled with basic sentence construction, even with scaffolding. The teacher observed,

T The struggle because, some of the students, cannot, like, construct sentence. Even though I have explained them how to put the sentence, to arrange a sentence.

This highlights the need for additional support strategies for students who struggle with language production in PBL contexts.

Real-World Relevance of English Skills

The teacher emphasized the practical importance of English language skills, which may have contributed to student motivation. As the teacher stated,

T I always, like, motivate them to use English because I try to get them understand that English is not only school subject, English is global language.

This focus on real-world application aligns with PBL principles and may enhance long-term language retention.

In conclusion, the implementation of PBL stages in this English language classroom demonstrated several benefits, including increased student engagement, peer support, and motivation for language use. However, it also revealed challenges in supporting students who struggle with language production. These findings suggest that while PBL can be an effective approach for enhancing English language acquisition among young learners, it requires careful scaffolding and individualized support to address the diverse needs of all students.

Discussion

This study examined the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) stages in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, focusing on young learners' language acquisition. The findings reveal both the successes and challenges of applying PBL principles in this specific setting.

Effective Implementation of PBL Stages

The teacher successfully implemented the four key PBL stages as outlined by Simpson (2011): Starting the Project, Developing the Project, Reporting to the Class, and Assessing the Project. This structured approach provided a clear framework for students to engage with the language learning process, aligning with the PBL principle of placing projects at the heart of the curriculum (Thomas, 2000).

In the Starting the Project stage, the observation captured how teacher effectively introduced the project and guided topic selection, crucial elements in the PBL process (Krajcik et al., 2005). The teacher's use of both English and the students' native language aligns with Cameron's (2001) suggestion that strategic use of L1 can be beneficial in certain situations. However, the minimal student engagement observed during this phase suggests a need for more scaffolding to encourage active participation, as emphasized by Blumenfeld et al. (2000).

Interdisciplinary Approach and Real-World Relevance

The interdisciplinary nature of the project, particularly evident in the Developing the Project stage, reflects Berns & Erickson's (2001) view of PBL as a method that allows students to understand processes from a real-world perspective. This approach resonates with the PBL principle of grounding projects in authentic situations to enhance relevance and engagement (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006).

Student Autonomy and Engagement

The study revealed a mixed picture regarding student autonomy and engagement. While students appreciated the freedom to choose topics and found research activities engaging, the limited student utterances during the Reporting to the Class stage suggest room for improvement in fostering student autonomy and participation. This highlights the challenge of fully implementing student-centered learning in a traditional classroom setting, a key aspect of PBL (Thomas, 2000).

Teacher Roles and Scaffolding

The teacher demonstrated multiple roles as described by Krajcik et al. (2005), including facilitator of inquiry, scaffold provider, and feedback giver. The teacher's approach to providing immediate, individualized feedback aligns with the PBL principle of ongoing assessment (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006). However, the need for extensive scaffolding, particularly in sentence construction, indicates the challenges of implementing PBL in diverse classrooms (Ngeow & Kong, 2001).

Language Use and EFL Context

The exclusive use of L1 during the Developing the Project stage contrasts with the ideal PBL environment in EFL contexts as described by Yeganehjoo et al. (2012), where students should have extensive opportunities to use the target language. This highlights a potential area for improvement in future implementations to maximize language learning opportunities.

Student Perceptions

Students generally perceived the PBL implementation positively, appreciating the teacher's clear explanations, the autonomy in topic selection, and the engaging nature of the research activities. This aligns with Bell's (2010) assertion that PBL can increase student motivation and engagement in language learning. However, the varying levels of comfort with English use suggest the need for continued support and scaffolding in language production.

Assessment Approach

The assessment method, focusing on students' written work, embodies the PBL principles of authentic assessment and product-oriented evaluation (Krajcik & Blumenfeld, 2006). This approach allows for a clear measurement of students' progress in written English proficiency while maintaining the core focus of PBL on authentic, product-oriented evaluation of student learning.

Implications and Future Directions

While this implementation of PBL shows adherence to many key principles, particularly in terms of teacher roles, scaffolding, ongoing assessment, and peer learning, there are areas for potential improvement. These include:

1. Enhancing student engagement and participation, especially during project introduction and reporting stages.
2. Increasing opportunities for target language use throughout all stages of the project.
3. Further adapting PBL principles to address the diverse needs and language levels of students in EFL contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study provides insights into the implementation of Project-Based Learning in an EFL context at the elementary level in Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that PBL can be effectively adapted to suit the needs of young language learners, offering a structured yet flexible approach to language instruction that aligns with the goals of the Merdeka Curriculum.

The teacher's implementation of PBL stages broadly aligned with theoretical frameworks, effectively structuring the project into four stages: Starting, Developing, Reporting, and Assessing. This approach

successfully incorporated key PBL principles such as scaffolding, inquiry-based learning, and collaborative work. Students generally responded positively to the PBL approach, appreciating its clarity, autonomy, collaborative nature, and the support provided by the teacher.

However, the study also identified several challenges and areas for improvement, particularly in fostering more active student participation, maximizing English use throughout all stages of the project, and creating more authentic communication situations. These findings highlight the complex nature of implementing PBL in EFL contexts and the need for continued refinement of teaching strategies.

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